

CHAPTER 7.
THE EMACIATED BUDDHA IN SOUTHEAST BANGLADESH
AND PAGAN (MYANMAR)

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Images of the emaciated Buddha were never a common representation in India; after those created in the Northwest in the first four or five (?) centuries¹ they practically disappear from the region. Two rare eighth-century images from Kashmir relate to the Gandharan representations although they reveal a more narrative perception of the subject (Pal 2003: cats 69 & 71). This topic remains thus afterwards absent for a very long period till it surfaces again in Eastern Bengal and Pagan.

The depiction of the asceticism is there introduced in one of the side scenes distributed around the central image of the Buddha reaching the Enlightenment in late eleventh- and twelfth-century images from Eastern Bengal and twelfth to thirteenth-century small sculptures from Pagan (Figs 1 and 3).² Beside these images which offer an ideal depiction of the Buddha's life this scene is also illustrated in some rare independent images belonging to the cycle of steles narrating Śākyamuni's biography in the Kyaukku Ônhmin or the Ananda Temple (Figs 6-9) and is, moreover, a major topic present in small sculptures in pyro-phyllite originating from the region of Pagan and dating probably from the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries (Figs 10-12).³ The presence of the scene in the images from Bangladesh can be explained through the fact that although reproducing a model created in Bihar – a model which, as a matter of fact, will be repeated in far-away regions and in different mediums: cloth-paintings in Tibet, murals and small stone (so-called 'andagu') images in Pagan, for instance –, these sculptures introduce depictions of moments of the life which are otherwise not illustrated in the available material from Bihar (but I suspect that they actually refer to a now lost model which must have been available to all Buddhists, perhaps in Bodhgaya or in another major centre). They thus reflect a renewed awareness for the biography which is coeval with the detailed illustration of the life in the Ananda Temple at Pagan, for instance. These images originating from a Bengali region which is located between South Asia and Burma, it is likely that they were carved within a



*Fig. 1 – The emaciated Buddha, detail of the 'Betagi image'.
Photo Joachim K. Bautze.*

¹ The chronology of images from the Northwest remains a major point of argumentation among scholars; recently, Juhyung Rhi has 'provisionally' (and thus very cautiously) dated the images of the fasting Buddha in the second century A.D. (2006/2008: 149 note 52).

² See Bautze-Picron 1999 & 2006 for this type of images from Burma. The images from Southeast Bangladesh have been considered in earlier publications (Bautze-Picron 1992 & 1995/96).

³ For a general introduction to this group, see Bautze-Picron 2006. A proper study of this group is in preparation.

community which sustained stronger links to Burma than to Bihar. However, and as seen below, the scene of asceticism in these images differs from the scene depicted in Pagan.



Fig. 2 – The Buddha protected by Mucilinda, detail of the ‘Betagi’ image. Photo Joachim K. Bautze.

Although its study can lead the way to various interpretations, this specific iconography basically remains an illustration of the six enduring years during which the future Buddha led extremely rigorous austerities after he had left Kapilavastu, cut his long hair and renounced his princely dresses.⁴ The period of asceticism started so

⁴ Some texts describe the pitiful shape of the Bodhisattva, leading some to believe he had died (Bautze-Picron 2007a: 107). The *Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra* tells that ‘... his skin became wrinkled, and his body attenuated and his eyes hollow as an old man’s; whilst his limbs were unable to support him as he moved, and all who beheld him were filled with a strange feeling of awe and reverence at the sight of the penance he was thus enduring.’ (Beal 1875/1985: 187) The same text mentions that during all those six years, he would only take millet ‘sufficient to keep him alive’ (ibid.). See also the lengthy description of the emaciated man in the *Mahāsaccakasutta* (Thomas 1927: 65-66; Nāṇamoli 1998: 18-19). Very recently (in fact, after the present paper had been written), Juhung Rhi published an important ‘new’ source praising the asceticism of the Buddha, i.e. the *Karuṇāpūṇḍarīka*: from a chronological point of view, this source could be roughly contemporary to the Gandhāran images (Rhi 2006/2008: 141-50).

to say with the Great Departure. In Pagan the rupture in Śākyamuni’s life is focused on the cutting of the hair, a scene which is prominently displayed below the images of the Buddhas of the past (Bautze-Picron 2003: 84 and pls 87-88). Although testimonies from Bihar or Bengal are altogether lacking, the understanding of the cutting of hair as being symbolic for a clear rupture most probably traces its origin in twelfth and thirteenth-century cloth-paintings from Tibet (Bautze-Picron 1995/96: 380 ‘thanka A’, figs 2-3 & 11; Pal 2003: cat. 121).

Such images can lead the way to meditation on death and on the ephemeral nature of life (as shown in this volume by Anna Maria Quagliotti’s article). But they might also have been the object of veneration actually paid to the (future) Buddha performing

unequalled austerities ... which easily eclipsed any such practice by heretics, and thus were a most eloquent symbol of the Buddha’s superiority over all those following heresy even in their privileged methods. At the same time, they were images of the austerities par excellence the Buddha endured through his numerous incarnations, which were perceived even close to an indispensable part of practice toward enlightenment. (Rhi 2006/2008: 146-7)⁵

However, the absence after the fourth century of any artistic allusion to the extreme asceticism practiced by Śākyamuni might have also resulted from the interpretation of this period of his life as being inauspicious, being even understood as ‘the last expiation of evil deed, which [the Buddha] had committed in his previous births.’ (Hara 1997: 250; see also Rhi 2006/2008: 140 note 38) These images may not only reflect an extreme aversion for the body as expressed in Buddhist texts (Wilson 1996: 41-76), but may also have generated at the level of aesthetics in a proper Indian context the feeling of aversion or *jugupsā* in total contrast with the emotion of peace or serenity, *śānta*, arising out all other Buddha’s images (Goswamy 1986: 198-200, 270-72). This might have had for partial consequence the absence of its depiction.⁶ Depictions of emaciated characters did not, however, remain unknown in a Buddhist context. Ascetics are indeed present in the narrative context of Śākyamuni’s life in India and it is out of this development that the presence of ascetics in a non-narrative context in the

⁵ The asceticism takes place on the vajrāsana – which clearly enhances its positive value in the *Karuṇāpūṇḍarīka* which also puts an ‘emphasis on the merit of seeing the image of austerities’ (Rhi 2006/08: 141 & 149). And see here Fig. 9. A very detailed list of sources describing the period of fasting has been recently published by Juhung Rhi 2006/2008: 132-3 & 140 note 38. Sources used in the present paper differ, being those which were more evidently available in Burma.

⁶ A similar remark might apply to the situation in Burma (and, but partly only, Thailand): after the images from the Pagan period (11th-13/14th c.; here Figs 3, 6-12), a long period follows during which no material is available: when it appears again, in the early 18th c. and on paintings, the (future) Buddha is never to be shown in his emaciated form but in his healthy body (here Figs 13-15).



Fig. 3 – *The emaciated Buddha, detail of Fig.1 in Bautze-Picron 2006. Photo Joachim K. Bautze.*

murals of Pagan emerged. Their position within the overall ornamental structure probably reflects their place within the Buddhist community: whereas the two monks Sāriputta and Moggallāna are constantly seen, kneeling on either side of the main image of the Buddha, these ascetics are utmost rarely depicted and then only in the frame around Buddha images or in the ornamentation of windows, i.e. near the outside space (Bautze-Picron 2003: 104,108, pls 126-8).

Behind the attitude of avoiding the viewing of the wasted body, a more ‘political’ approach to the use of the Buddha image might have been at work, which might have fostered this development. Being the most concrete manner of expressing ideas, the image is addressed not only to those who ordered the images to be carved or de facto worshipped them, but also to those who belong to the periphery, i.e. to the ‘others’ who visit Brahmanical institutions and worship Śiva or Viṣṇu, for instance. Through veneration and rituals, worshippers concentrate their attention on the image in which various specific spiritual, social and political concepts converge, making it the most explicit and adequate expression of a community opposite the other social or religious groups. In this context, emaciated characters

of non-Buddhist origin are distributed at the periphery of ‘healthy’ Buddha images from the sixth century onwards.⁷

The small images presently under survey were probably carved in the region of Pagan. The mere size of these images, rarely exceeding 20 cm and the fact that they belong to a fairly large group of carvings let suggest that they must have been part of relics deposited in a stūpa or an image; they were thus most probably not aimed at a popular or public worship.

Images from Pagan which illustrate the ‘life’ of the Buddha in a fixed set of events reflect a tradition which hinges on the north-eastern India tradition of the ninth to twelfth century (Bautze-Picron 1992 & 1995/96). However, if the overall structure borrowed from India is preserved, the different ‘motifs’ which are introduced in the images of the ascetic Buddha mirror the ‘birmanization’ of the Indian model and announce the fourteenth-century Thai school of Sukhotai. These motifs reflect, moreover, a refined mind well-aware of

⁷ I deal with this aspect of the Buddha iconography in a separate study bearing on the images distributed at the periphery of the Buddha and concerned with the definition and the limits of the Buddha image; this study will be published in the *Berliner Indologische Studien*.



Fig. 4 – The Buddha protected by Mucilinda, detail of Fig.1 in Bautze-Picron 2006. Photo Joachim K. Bautze.



Fig. 5 – The Buddha protected by Mucilinda together with his representation as emaciated. After Pal 1993: 58.



Fig. 6 – *The emaciated Buddha, Kyaukku Ônhmin Temple, Pagan. After Luce 1969-70, III: pl. 141d.*

the literary sources, their study conveying an understanding of the image as a way of asserting major ideas belonging to the local main stream Theravādic Buddhism.

a. The two gods, the two monks, the two merchants

Two village people push sticks into the ears of the (future) Buddha in two images of the site (Figs 6-7); two devas support the Buddha in a relief of the Ananda temple and in a small image in pyro-phyllite (Figs 9 & 12), and two flank him in another stone relief from the same site (Fig. 8).⁸ They can be replaced by the two monks Sāriputta and

Moggallāna (Fig. 3) who constitute a constant element of the iconography in the temples of Pagan (Bautze-Picron 2003: 103-4) and most probably symbolize the whole *saṅgha* (and act thus as intermediaries between the Buddha and the lay community). Either standing or flying, the Devas carry a vessel (Figs 8, 10 & 12) which symbolizes the ‘divine energy’ which they are dissuaded by the future Buddha to infuse ‘through the pores of his skin’ as said in the *Nidānakathā* (Jayawickrama 1990: 89-93) or in a similar way in the *Mahāsaccakasutta* (*Majjhimanikāya*

⁸ The two Devas standing on either side of the (future) Buddha in Fig.8 venerate him. Further Devas are depicted in the pedestal, the central figure apparently playing music and being thus Indra (see here Fig. 14),

other again holding bowls. What is striking here is that each of these five panels from the site (Figs 6-9 and Luce 1969-70, III: pl. 152c) has its own iconographic program, which proves the creative thinking of the artists and monks of Pagan. Within this context, one observes that in one image, the Buddha does not display the *dhyāna* - but well the *bhūmisparśamudrā* (Fig. 9).



Fig. 7 – The emaciated Buddha, Ananda Temple, Pagan. After Luce 1969-70, III: pl. 318d.

I, *Sutta* 36; Nāṇamoli 1998: 18-19) whereas in the *Paṭhamasambodhikathā*, these gods ‘preserved his life, by insinuating food through the pores of his skin’ (Alabaster 1871: 138-42), the same being told in the *Mālāṅkaravatthu* (Edwardes 1959: 35-39; Bigandet 1880, I: 72-83).⁹

This departs from the Indian tradition where villagers were picking sticks in the future Buddha’s ears (Bautze-Picron 2008: 171-2), a scene still observed in the images from Southeast Bangladesh (Fig. 1) which had introduced a

composition preserved up to Burma, i.e. the Buddha flanked by two standing characters turned toward him. Beyond Bengal (Pal/Meech-Pekarik 1988: pl. 14, fig. 28; Pal 1993: 58, cat. 4; here Fig. 5), it is also observed in the North in Nepal (Zwalf 1985: 119 & 127, cat. 172; Pal 1985: 103-4 cat. S23) and in the South in Pagan (Figs 6-7; Stadtner 2005: 78).¹⁰

The alms bowl is constantly observed in the murals and sculpture from Pagan, a presence which stresses how this attribute remains fundamental in being at the point of articulation between the *saṅgha* and the lay community. Beyond this link, the bowl, in being the place where

⁹ Brahmā and Indra kneel on either side of the emaciated Buddha on a relief from Gandhāra, letting surmise that the tradition of having Devas attending to the Buddha during this hard period of his life has a long past (Coomaraswamy 1928: 250-1 & fig. 6; also drawn in Tissot 1985: pl. XXV.1). Also at an earlier period in the Swāt valley, one observes that the meditating Buddha can be rather thin (Faccenna 2007, fig. 7.36).

¹⁰ As reminded by Stadtner, loc.cit., the event is also narrated in the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (The Middle Length 2005: 175).



Fig. 8 – The emaciated Buddha, Pagan Museum. After Luce 1969-70, III: pl. 407d.



Fig. 9 – The emaciated Buddha, Ananda Temple, Pagan. After Seidenstücker 1919: Abb. 59.

the food is collected, becomes a symbol of healthy life: the presence of this attribute – the only attribute of the Buddha in fact – in the pedestal below the emaciated Buddha might illustrate the existence of an alternative to the severe austerities which the future Buddha had chosen to experiment. The *Nidānakathā* also underlines the fact that the future Buddha ‘went about gathering alms...’ for which the alms bowl is evidently necessary (Jayawickrama 1990: 89-93). As we know, the taking of food led to the regeneration of the future Buddha who had lost all his gleam and was even thought to be deceased (Bautze-Picron 2007a: 107); when resuming to food, the future Buddha recovered his thirty-two characteristics and the ‘golden hue’ of his body (*Nidānakathā*), and his hair grew again, as shown by Anna Maria Quagliotti in the present volume.

Among the events following the Enlightenment, one is closely related to this concept and practically acts as a moment symmetric to the offering of the milk-rice prepared by Sujātā. Dividing the meal offered to him by the young village girl into seven times seven small balls (Strong

2001: 69; Swearer 2004: 146),¹¹ Śākyamuni ate all of them, without any further food, within the forty-nine days following the Enlightenment (*Nidānakathā*) (Jayawickrama 1990: 89-93) or, in reversal of events, within forty-nine days before the Bodhi (*Mālāṅkaravatthu*) (Edwardes 1959: 35-39; Bigandet 1880, I: 72-83). Like those of the *Abhiññakramaṇasūtra*, the authors of the *Mahāvastu* state that ‘... the Exalted One fasted for seven weeks or forty-nine days’ after the Bodhi, on the basis of which Robert Brown had partly concluded that the image of the emaciated Buddha would reproduce the Buddha practicing fast during the seven weeks following the Enlightenment, i.e. during the so-called seven stations (Brown 1997:107, 112-4).¹²

¹¹ The forty-nine portions clearly echo the forty-nine days spent around the tree of the Bodhi: ‘He divided his exquisite food into forty-nine mouthfuls, which he ate entire, without mixing any water with it. During forty-nine days he spent round the Bodi [sic!] tree, Buddha never bathed, nor took any food, nor experienced the least want.’ (*Mālāṅkaravatthu*: Bigandet 1880, I: 83). See also Rhi 2006/2008: 131 note 22.

¹² Moreover the presence at Bodhgaya of an image showing the Buddha at a certain moment of his existence does not imply that the depicted event took place in the site; enough is it here to mention the illustration of different events, such as the birth for instance, in niches of the models

The offering of the milk-rice marks thus the beginning of the cycle leading to the Enlightenment. Similarly, the seven stations, i.e. the seven weeks, which succeeded to this moment conclude with the taking of the food offered by the two merchants Trapuṣa (Tapussa) and Bhallika (Strong 2001: 78-80; Quagliotti 2005: 218-21).¹³ The Buddha rewarded them in giving some of his hair and nails which were going to be inserted in a *caitya*, the hair being, according to the Burmese tradition, enshrined within the Shwedagon (Strong 1998). As seen in a very rare depiction of this event (Fig. 17), both merchants kneel in the pedestal on either side of a stand which supports an alms bowl, each presenting further the honeyed meal to the Buddha who holds a bowl while picking some of his hair. The four bowls which are thus depicted probably remind that the four Lokapālas had offered him bowls which he had changed into one single one with four rims in order to take this meal.¹⁴

b. The five monks

The future Buddha had met on his way five mendicants who 'became his constant companions during the six years he was engaged in his great striving, and they served him' (*Nidānakathā*) (Jayawickrama 1990: 89-93). As a result of trying to suppress his 'breath he fell down unconscious' – some gods thinking even that he had passed away –, a scene which is illustrated in a relief from the Ananda temple (Fig. 16) and survived till the nineteenth century in Burma

reproducing the Bodhi mandir. Rather, the presence in this site of such images let surmise the wish to recreate the ideal life within a very specific spatial setting – which is a phenomenon noticed at various levels, in painting, in sculpture, in the recreation of the seven stations, etc. For the quote in the *Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra*, see Beal 1875/1985: 239: 'it was now forty-nine days... since he had eaten nothing.' Early sources, however, suggest a shorter length, one month, for the sojourn of the Buddha at the site of his Enlightenment (Bareau 1963: 99). As suggested by André Bareau, the 'seven days' motif was probably first introduced in the Mucilinda and the two merchants episodes; moreover, the offering of food by the later might have concluded a (single) week of fasting. 'From there, the pattern of the seven days would have been introduced in the other narrations' and the fasting would have been extended to a longer period of seven times seven days, with the visit of the merchants concluding it. Moreover, the same early texts studied by Bareau refer to food of various types being taken during these successive weeks of meditation, i.e. under the goatherd tree or under Mucilinda (Bareau 1963: 101: Vinaya of the Mahīśāsaka).

As seen above, the (pre-Enlightenment) asceticism took an end when he decided to resume eating and received the bowl of milk-rice from Sujātā, carefully dividing up this food in forty-nine small portions or *pinḍas* (note 11). Whether he took all of this food in one meal or in forty-nine days, this happened before the Enlightenment. When fasting during this (post-Enlightenment) period, the Buddha does preserve his healthy body as seen here in the depiction of the event concluding the seventh week when the two merchants offer him a sweet meal (Fig. 17).

¹³ So is the tradition preserved by the *Nidānakathā* (Strong 2001: 78-79 & 81) whereas the offering of food by the two merchants follows immediately the Bodhi in the 'Discourse of the Fourfold Assembly' (*Catuspariṣatsūtra*): *ibid*: 79-81. See also Bareau 1963: 106-123.

¹⁴ See the narrative in the *Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra* for instance (Beal 1875/1985: 239-240) or in the *Pathom Somphōt* ('The Buddha's Supreme Enlightenment') (Swearer 2004: 135). Late pictorial depictions of the scene show indeed the simultaneous presence of Sakka who offers the myrobolan to the Buddha (for which episode, consult Bareau 1963: 124-6), of the four Guardians of space who present him with his alms-bowl and of the two merchants, see for instance Herbert 1992: 43 or Stadtner 1991: fig.9.

and Thailand. In a Burmese illuminated manuscript from the first part of the nineteenth c., the five monks kneel at the feet of the reclining Buddha (Fig. 15; Herbert 1992: 34-35). In the murals of the Wat Choeng Tha, at Ayutthaya (Fig. 13), the ascetics helped the future Buddha when he collapsed, 'one held his feet, two supported his body, one fanned him and the fifth cried.' (*The Life* 1957: 54-55, pl. 18).¹⁵ In this mural, the dark shade of his skin is particularly noticeable, a feature mentioned in different sources.¹⁶ A mural in the Wat Ratchasitharam at Thonburi (Fig. 14) reproduces the iconography observed at Pagan, i.e. the future Buddha is depicted lying on his side with the five ascetics in the lower part of the mural whereas Sakka sits, plucking here the string of his musical instrument (*Wat* 1982: 68-69; *The Life* 1957: 56-57, pl. 19).

In those paintings like in the carvings from Pagan, these men are never depicted as the ascetics who they are but as the monks who they will become in the Deer Park of Sarnath. Likewise, the future Buddha is depicted as Enlightened – a choice which probably betrays disinclination for such an extreme concept as the emaciated body: as a matter of fact, Śākyamuni is depicted at Pagan as a Buddha from the very moment when he cuts his hair. The presence of Sakka playing his musical instrument contributes to this interpretation; the god plucks three different strings, one too high, one too low and one producing a perfect sound, which helps the future Buddha to understand that neither extreme asceticism nor a life of pleasure can lead the way to Enlightenment, but well the Middle Way (*Paṭhamasambodhikathā; Sittihāt Ōk Buat*) (Strong 2001: 66; Swearer 2004: 145-6). As to the fact that the five disciples are not shown in the guise of ascetics but of monks, it probably indicates the pre-eminence of the status of the monk over the position of the ascetic – an observation which is corroborated by the respective position of the (constant) image of the two monks on either side of the cult image whereas the (rare) depictions of ascetics are seen at the periphery in the iconographic program of the murals at Pagan as mentioned above.¹⁷

Moreover, the presence of the five monks always calls for the representation of the two deer as seen below (e) and of the alms bowl put above a stand or presented by one of the (monks-)ascetics (Figs 10-12) as if they would be suggesting Śākyamuni an alternative to his asceticism.

c. The banyan-tree or nyagrodha (*Ficus benghalensis*)

The 'andagu' images show the Buddha seated in *padmāsana* below a banyan, a tree which is also related in literary sources to the period of extreme asceticism as being the

¹⁵ See also Swearer 2004: 145: 'Siddhattha continued to fast, growing weaker and weaker until he could no longer stand, whereupon the five hermits cared for him as he lay upon his bed.'

¹⁶ As it stands in the *Mālāṅkaravattthu*, for instance (Edwardes 1959: 35; Bigandet 1880, I: 73).

¹⁷ But words attributed to the Buddha might have encouraged this way of showing them: they are indeed named bhikkhus in the *Mahāsaccakasutta* (Thomas 1927: 66; Nānamoli 1998: 21).



Fig. 10 – The emaciated Buddha, private collection. Photo Joachim K. Bautze.



Fig. 11 – The emaciated Buddha, private collection. Photo Joachim K. Bautze.

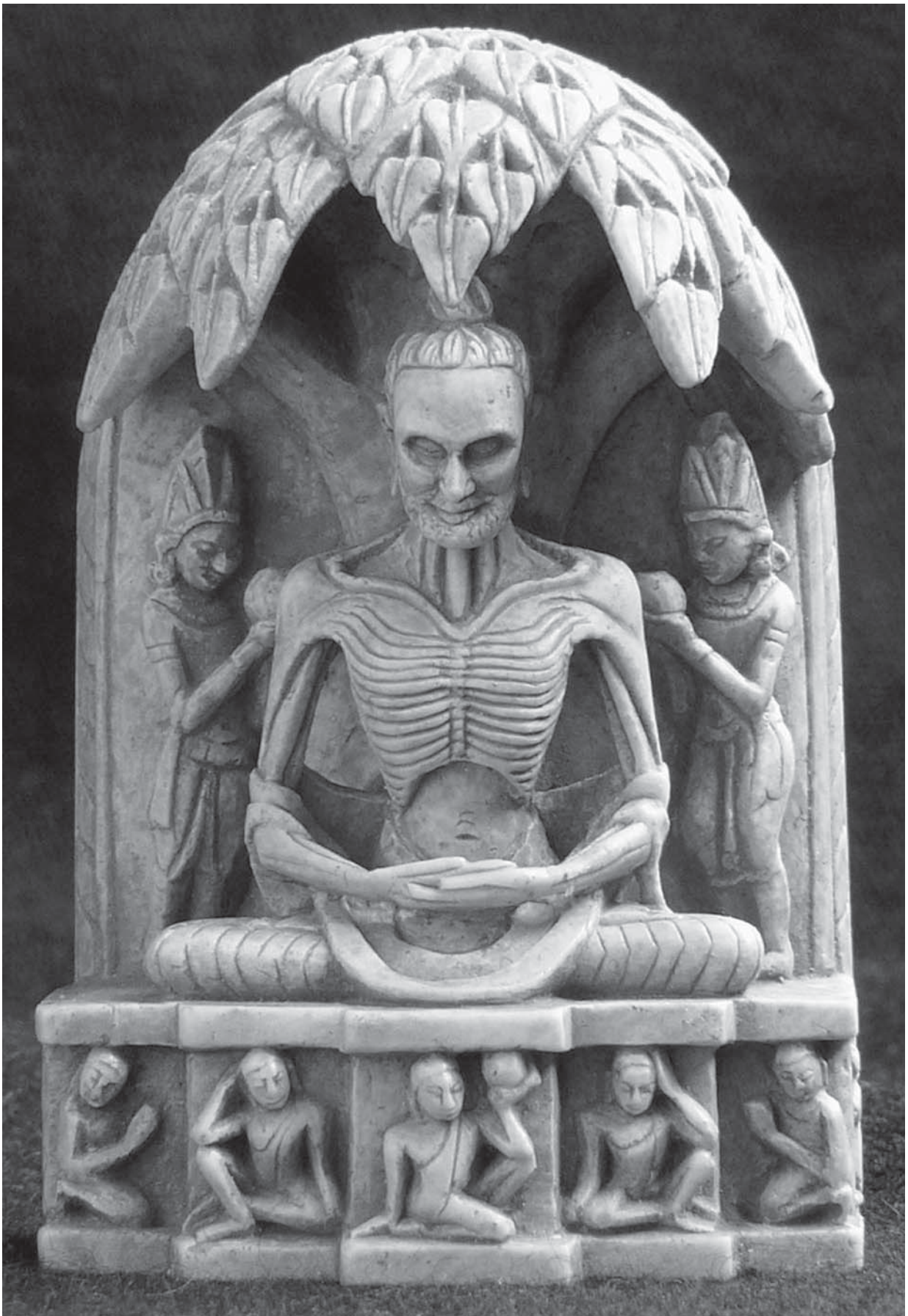


Fig. 12 – The emaciated Buddha, private collection. Photo Joachim K. Bautze.



Fig. 13 – *The fainting Buddha, Wat Choeng Tha, Ayutthaya. After The Life 1957: pl. 18.*

tree below which the future Buddha spent partly if not all of his six years of severe austerities. It is also while seated below this tree that he resumed to food in accepting from Sujātā his last meal before taking place under the tree at Bodhgaya, i.e. a *Ficus religiosa*.¹⁸ The proper site where the banyan-tree stood is not yet identified but it was evidently in the vicinity of Bodhgaya since the Enlightenment episode follows directly this period, and in the *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka* the asceticism prior to the Enlightenment took even place under the Bodhi tree (*bodhivṛkṣamūlavajrāsane*) (Rhi 2006/2008: 141).

A major banyan tree is still worshipped today in the Southern suburbs of Gaya, the ‘undecaying banyan’ or Akṣaya-vaṭa (Fig. 18) being indeed a major station in the *śrāddha* made in honour of the dead ones (Gode 1961: 375sq; Dubey 1997: 1105, 1114; Viennot 1954: 199). Beside the fact that this tree is believed to give endless merit to those who accomplish the pilgrimage all through Gaya, and that its roots are also supposed to merge with those of the same tree at Prayaga (Allahabad), it is the mere presence of such rituals made below and involving the tree which cannot be ignored here. As the study of other aspects of Buddhist art in the region of Gaya/Bodhgaya shows, a number of features taken by this iconography evolved out of a reaction to the existence of Gaya as a central Brahmanical place of pilgrimage made for the rescue of the souls of the

deceased ones (Bautze-Picron 2004: note 151 & 2007b: 85-88 & note 68).

And although definitive pieces of evidence are here lacking, we cannot but suggest that the long period of asceticism took place under or near the Akṣaya-vaṭa as it was apparently believed at the beginning of the nineteenth century as reported by Francis Buchanan (Buchanan 1936: 125):¹⁹

Near this remarkable tank is a high and large terrace, built of stone and brick, composed evidently of ruins and having every appearance of a recent work. On it is growing a Banyan tree, which the orthodox call Akshaybat, and allege that it was planted by Brahma. The Buddhists believe that Gautama passed six years under its shade. The tree is not large and has no mark of old age; but may have been frequently renewed by slips from successive stocks...

¹⁸ On these two trees in the context of the Buddha’s life, see Viennot 1954: 164-190, 199-200, passim; see also Coomaraswamy 1977: 384-6. Concerning the offering of food by the young village-girl(s), see Thomas 1927: 70-71.

¹⁹ See also Buchanan’s Journal: ‘They [i.e. the Buddhists] had no temple near the present Gya [i.e. Gaya], but say that Gautoma (sic!) lived six years under the Akshiyā Bot, which they call Gautama Bot, and the tank called Rukminikund the Buddha call Gautamakund...’ (Jackson 1925: 61). Another (?) tradition relates the hill of the Gayaśīrṣa, a site visited at various moments by the (future) Buddha with the Brahmayoni, a hill located near the Akṣaya-vaṭa. As a matter of fact, Śākyamuni ‘ascended the hill ... wishing to enjoy rest of mind and body. Having arranged a seat of leaves he sat down beneath a tree’ before having even started his extreme asceticism; from there he went to the village of Uravilva where he received a meal from Sujātā before ‘he... sat down and composed himself to severe contemplation’ (Beal 1875/1985: 185-6). Information of a completely different nature relates the sacrifice of goats in honour of the Manes to the tree, both, i.e. the sacrifice of goat and the tree, being quoted in the same text (Gode 1961: 377).



Fig. 14 – *The fainted Buddha, Wat Ratchasittharam, Thonburi. After Wat 1982: 69.*

Another banyan tree appears in the cycle of the Bodhi, the Buddha taking place then under the ‘tree of the Goatherd’ during the fifth or sixth week after the Enlightenment,²⁰ a tree which can also be related to the tree of the pre-Enlightenment period of asceticism as seen below.

d. Below the banyan, below Mucilinda

Within this context, one can wonder about the depiction of the emaciated Buddha in the images carved in southeast Bangladesh where the scene is paired to the image of the meditating Buddha under Mucilinda (Figs 1-2). Both

scenes are integrated in the lower part of the image, between the sequence of the main events and a group of pre-Enlightenment scenes which cover the pedestal, and anyway at the edge of the image. Both groups of events are differentiated inasmuch as the so-called ‘main’ events are depicted within small niches or shrines distributed around the central image whereas the lower scenes do not get any specific elements enhancing their importance. Both scenes refer, however, to moments which belong respectively to the pre- and to the post-Enlightenment.²¹

²⁰ Early sources, however, date this episode right after the week spent under the Bodhi tree (Bareau 1963: 98). Consult Strong 2004: 81 for a comparison of two sources presenting different sequences to the episodes.

²¹ Both belong together in the images from Southeast Bangladesh (‘A13’ & ‘A14’ in Bautze-Picron 1992: figs 4-6) as well as in painting from Bengal (Pal/Meech Pekarik 1988: pl. 14; Pal 1993: 58, cat.4: here Fig. 5) and in early Tibetan cloth-paintings (Pal 2003: cat. 121). In the ‘andagu’ images, both scenes form also a pair in the lower part of the images, but one should mention the fact that this depiction of the Buddha sheltered by Mucilinda does not fulfil the function of being one of the six stations

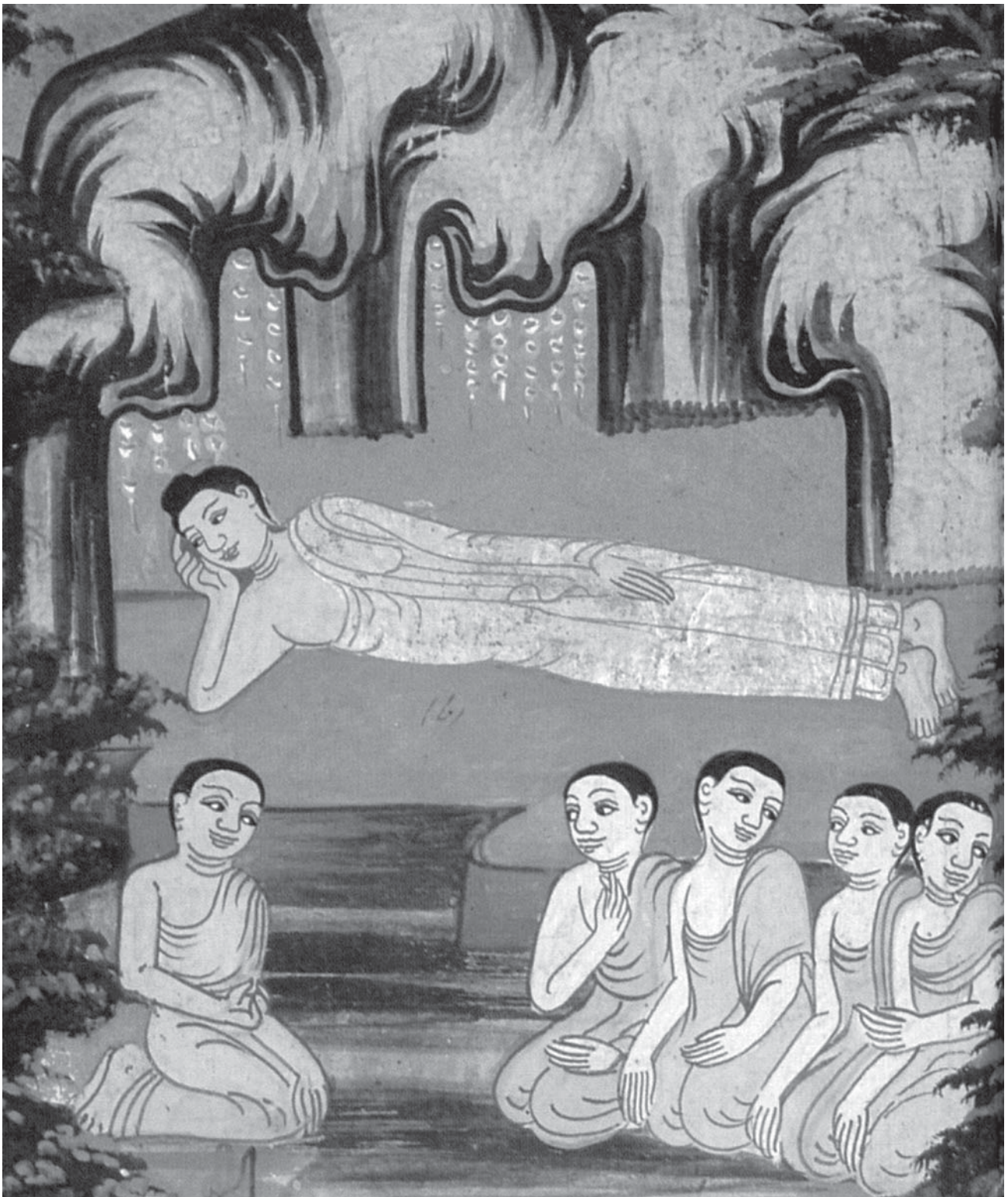


Fig. 15 – *The fainted Buddha*, Manuscript inv. Or. 14297, f.15-16 (The British Library, London). After Herbert 1992: 34-35.

The images of the Buddha protected by Mucilinda and of the emaciated future Buddha remain rare at Pagan: the

distributed around the central Buddha image since this series includes its own depiction of the Buddha seated below the snake (Bautze-Picron 1999: fig. 1 or Brown 1997: fig. 4 for instance). Some hierarchy may have also been introduced, the image paired to the ascetic Buddha being seated under a three-headed Mucilinda whereas the Buddha of the fifth station sits under a single-headed snake in one example (Brown 1997: fig. 4).

Buddha is seated below Mucilinda in a stone image and in a thirteenth-century wood carving from the same site and the topic is also encountered in the murals of the place.²² Like in the images from Bangladesh, both scenes form a pair in

²² Bautze-Picron 2003: pl. 40 & p. 41 (mural). Galloway 2002: figure 5.6, Menzies 2001: 30-31, cat. 13 (wooden image). *Dokumentation* 2002: 95 (stone image). I am thankful to Charlotte Galloway for having very

small carvings showing the life of the Buddha as ideally depicted through eight major events, eventually enlarged with the seven stations (Figs 3-4). The image of the fasting (future) Buddha from the Ananda temple differs from those found in other temples at Bagan which tally the traditional attitude of Śākyamuni meditating.²³

This simultaneity of representation of these two events calls for some more attention since both iconographic types share the Buddha sitting and meditating (Fig. 5). These two images reflect the opposition between the unhealthy body before and the healthy body after the Enlightenment but also refer to the simultaneous presence of fire and water within Śākyamuni.²⁴ Beside the independent small sculptures reproducing the emaciated Buddha, another important part of this group of ‘andagu’ images illustrates the Buddha meditating under Mucilinda (Bautze-Picron 2006: fig. 4a-b). Behind the reference to the unhealthy body, the emaciated image can refer, in a more dramatic manner, to death since the future Buddha was even thought to have passed away. There is no place to dwell at length here on the topic but the Enlightenment was also experienced as a second birth, as a regeneration as opposed to the surrounding death to which Śākyamuni was confronted and which he overcame in the night of the Enlightenment. The simultaneous representation of the emaciated Buddha below the banyan tree and of the healthy Buddha below Mucilinda might thus constitute a reference to death and life, enhancing, moreover, the positive way of life offered by the Buddha in contrary to the extremely hard path of life imposed by other spiritual ways and which can lead to death.

e. The deer, the banyan tree

The creation of these images reflects a very refined and well-read mind. How to account for instance for the presence of the two deer? We know that in the Indian vision

kindly sent me photos of the wooden image today preserved in the National Gallery of Australia.

²³ These images are reproduced by Luce 1969-70, III: pls 141d (Kyuakku Ōnhmin), 152c (Myinpyagu), 318d (Ananda) and 407d (Pagan Museum) (and I: 165). Only one among them (the Myinpyagu image) shows the (future) Buddha alone. The other ones introduce two male characters holding ‘tubes’ with which they ‘press ambrosia in his ears’ according to Luce, whereas Donald Stadtner suggests to recognize more probably here the episode where village people thrust ‘spikes into his ears’ (Stadtner 2005: 78, where the relief from the Kyuakku Ōnhmin is reproduced).

²⁴ Beyond this dichotomy, it could well also be the simultaneous presence within the Buddha of fire – expressed through yogic exercises – and water – referred to by meditation – which might be here reflected. Enough it is to quote after the *Abhiṅṣkramanasūtra*: ‘Seated thus, he began to reflect, and these three ideas presented themselves; that as it is impossible to obtain fire from boring wood that is wet, or by using dung that is sodden; so, though a Shaman or a Brahman may not practise lust, yet so long as there is the least love of it in the heart, he cannot obtain Supreme Wisdom (the dampness of the wood and the dung must be got rid of) ... Although, he thought, that when a Shaman or Brahman, in addition to abstention from evil, has experienced in his heart a feeling of universal love, and desires to arrive at perfection that he may profit others, then like dry wood and dry dung, the fire may be easily kindled.’ (Beal 1875/1985: 185). Austerities are thus here the way to disentangle from emotions which are like dampness: freed from them, the mind reaches perfection like the wood freed from humidity can properly burn. See also Thomas 1927: 64; Neumann 1995: 270-71; Bareau 1963: 42-43.



Fig. 16 – The faintest Buddha, Ananda Temple, Pagan. After Seidenstücker 1919: Abb. 60.

of the hermit one or more of these peaceful animals refer to the ascetic’s life in the forest, and that even often one or more lion can be introduced in this depiction of an idyllic peaceful life: as such, both animals are present from Sanchi to Deogarh or Mahabalipuram. And as such also, the deer occur in a small image flanking the Buddha meditating below a tree (Bautze-Picron 2006: fig. 17a-b).

The deer, more particularly the two deer, refer, in the precise context of the Buddha’s life to the Mṛgadāva, the ‘Deer Forest’ located in the vicinity of Varanasi, today at Sarnath, where the Buddha held his first sermon – and the presence of the five monks who were the very first ones to get the teaching of the Buddha confirms this link.



Fig. 17 – The Buddha pulling his hair, private collection. Photo Joachim K. Bautze.



Fig. 18 – The Akṣaya-vaṭa, Gaya. Photo Joachim K. Bautze.

How did it come to be known as the ‘Deer Forest’? The answer is provided with in *Jātaka* 12 and is also narrated by Xuanzang; thus in the *Jātaka* of the ‘Banyan Deer’ (*Nigrodhamiḡa/ Nyagrodhamṛga - jātaka* or the ‘*jātaka* of the tree growing downwards’) (Grey 2000: 292-4) we learn how the Bodhisattva, named Nigrodha, was the Golden king of the deer who could convince the local king Brahmadata to renounce hunting deer and to offer to the herd of animals a park where it could live and graze in peace. This was going to become the deer park where Śākyamuni would hold his first sermon. The deer might thus refer to the meditation as mentioned above, but also to the place of the first Sermon; sustaining this identification is the presence of the five monks in the pedestal, thus a further reference to Sarnath.

A general consensus prevails in the Pāli sources in naming a banyan tree under which the Buddha spent the fifth week after his Enlightenment ‘Ajapālā’ or ‘goatherd’ (*Nidānakathā*) (Jayawickrama 1990: 89-93).²⁵ This spot where the Buddha would be confronted to Māra’s daughters was located on the banks of the Neranjara at Uruvelā near the Bodhi tree.

²⁵ But see note 18.

However, another more detailed version is given by the *Mahāvastu* (Jones 1978: 287-90) and the *Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra* (Beal 1875/1985: 192 and 238) where the name is applied to the tree which protected the Buddha during his six years penance. Thus, we read in the first text that

when [a] goatherd saw the Exalted One mortifying himself with these grim austerities faith arose in him. With serene heart he planted a young banyan tree for the Exalted One... Thus the goatherd’s young banyan tree quickly grew to have great branches and to be a lovely and beautiful tree through the power of the Exalted One... In virtue of that serenity of heart and his root of merit, on the dissolution of his body he was reborn among the devas of Trāyamstrimsha as a deva named Nyagrodha possessing great majesty and power... The deva Nyagrodha, while he was thus pondering what his root of merit might be, saw the banyan tree which he had planted for the Exalted One on the banks of the river Nairanjanā. And so, accompanied by several thousands of devas, the deva Nyagrodha, in his surpassing beauty irradiating the whole abode

of Mucilinda with a sublime radiance, came to the Exalted One, bowed his head at his feet and stood to one side...

This veneration of the Buddha took place in the close vicinity of the Bodhi tree since the Buddha is supposedly protected by Mucilinda when the deva Nyagrodha sees the tree and comes to pay homage to the Buddha, recognizing him from his previous human life.²⁶ There is thus here a direct link between the banyan tree under which the period of austerities was spent and the banyan tree ‘of the goatherd’ or Ajapālā under which the Buddha would sit and meditate in the sixth week after the Enlightenment, following the week of meditation below Mucilinda. Moreover, from this narrative, one could surmise that the austerities had taken place in the close vicinity of what would become the site of the Enlightenment since this is there that the deva Nyagrodha recognizes the tree which he had planted in his previous life. As a matter of fact, Nyagrodha concludes in requesting the Buddha to ‘make use of [the] banyan tree’ which the Buddha did: ‘After he had left the abode of Mucilinda the Nāga king, the Exalted One spent the sixth week fasting in joy and ease at the foot of the Goatherd’s Banyan-tree.’ However, the complete narrative might also be a rather artificial construction linking the two different banyan trees under which Śākyamuni had taken place, one before the Enlightenment and for a long period of severe asceticism and one after the Enlightenment and for seven days of meditation.

The images under survey might thus illustrate the hard way of austerities which should not be followed and simultaneously convey the idea that to become *buddha*, or be a follower of the Buddha, constitutes the correct way of life (vs. death) which is also achieved by taking food, by collecting it in alms bowl, and by renouncing the ascetic life in order to become a monk. Further, through their mere existence, they express the notion that one should not simply disregard such extreme ways but be aware of their existence, only then is it possible to make the right choice – just like the Buddha did.

The understanding of images from Burma in the first centuries of the second millennium cannot be made with exclusive reference to specific texts while putting aside other ones. While it is true that Pāli sources were fundamental, even leading to local biographies of the Buddha, it is also true that they had to blend in with a substratum where some components clearly betray concepts which belonged to the mainstream (Sanskrit) Buddhism of Northeast India – notably in what concerns the visual rendering of the Buddha biography. Rather than understanding the images

²⁶ Which reverses the sequence of events as narrated in the *Nidānakathā* (Strong 2001: 81) where the meditation below the banyan tree of the goatherd takes place in the fifth week (the Buddha being then disturbed by Māra’s daughters) and the meditation below Mucilinda during the sixth week. Similarly, the Vinaya of the Theravādin places the week below the tree in the second week, the week below Mucilinda in the third week (Bureau 1963: 98 & 101).

as a mere depiction of textual descriptions, we should also wonder about the possibility that they act as the (visual) reflect of the community of monks within the society, and of concepts which either refer to the nature of the Buddha or to Buddhist thought.

Within this context, we should also not neglect the fact that although dealing with a particular group of images or a specific iconography these images are part of a larger group and only but reflect a segment of the Buddha iconography. Moreover, and this is illustrated by the iconographic peculiarities of the sculpture and murals of the Pagan period, the interpretation of a motif which can be given in one site does not necessarily apply to the art of other Asian regions, neither can it be generalized to all periods.

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